

CONSUMER ALERT

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Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade & Consumer Protection



Pre-Paid Debit Cards Key to Recent Sweepstakes Scams

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MADISON – Calls are coming in from all around the state to the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection's (DATCP) Consumer Information Hotline about a sweepstakes scam. Wisconsin residents have received fraudulent calls claiming to be from Publishers Clearing House that falsely tell them that they have won a sweepstakes prize. To collect the winnings, however, they are required to pay an upfront fee with a pre-paid debit card (the actual Publishers Clearing House organization does NOT charge a fee to contest winners). DATCP reminds consumers that a request from a stranger for money via a pre-paid card is likely a scam.

Potential victims were directed to pick up a Green Dot MoneyPak pre-paid debit card from a retail or drug store in order to transfer the required upfront fees. In two instances, the potential victim told the scammer that they could not afford the fees, and the scammer offered to let them pay a discounted amount.

Sweepstakes scams are one of the most common complaints that the Bureau of Consumer Protection receives every year, and they often call for a payment using a MoneyPak card. Scammers choose pre-paid debit cards and wire transfers as ways for victims to send them money because these transactions are difficult to trace and nearly impossible to reverse. Just like sending cash, once the victim turns over the account number and pin from a pre-paid card or completes the wire transfer, both the scammer and the money are gone.

The homepage on the Green Dot MoneyPak website warns purchasers to be aware of potential scams involving the card, noting sweepstakes scams specifically:

"If anyone else asks for your MoneyPak number or information from your receipt, it's probably a scam. Don't give your MoneyPak number to pay for something you buy through the classifieds or to collect a prize or sweepstakes."

In addition to a request for upfront fees, be aware of the following red flags of a sweepstakes scam:

- A scammer may use an organization's name in their pitch to add legitimacy to their claims.
- Look out for any urgency in a phone call about a sweepstakes or contest. These scammers want you to make a quick decision and send them money before you realize it is a scam. Do not be fooled by solicitations that urge you to act immediately.
- Your caller ID can deceive you. Scam artists often use electronic devices or internet technology to make your caller ID display a different phone number than the one they are actually using to call you. Scammers can call from anywhere in the world and make it appear that their number is in your area.
- As always, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

For additional information or to file a complaint, visit the Consumer Protection Bureau at datcp.wisconsin.gov, send an e-mail to datcp hotline@wisconsin.gov or call the Consumer Information Hotline toll-free at 1-800-422-7128.

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